

Introduction: The Management of Federal Archaeological Collections

Myra Giesen

Five of the articles in this issue of *Museum Anthropology* are based on papers originally presented at the 1996 Plains Anthropological Conference in Iowa City, IA. They were part of The Council for Museum Anthropology sponsored symposium "Archeological Collections: Problems, Issues, and Possibilities." The symposium was organized by Brad Coutant and me as a portion of our continuing effort to help affected parties better understand special issues associated with federal archeological collections. It was originally hoped to have all twelve papers presented at the meeting be published together; however, not all the authors were able to submit final versions of their papers to the journal. My goal in this introduction is to briefly describe the objectives of our session as a backdrop for the articles that appear herein.

The primary objective of the symposium was to explore issues affecting archeological collections with special attention being placed on federal collections. Recent federal laws have mandated new and more rigorous regulatory criteria associated with the acquisition and maintenance of archeological collections resulting from federal expenditures. These laws significantly affect the curation of federal collections; in particular, the laws increase the level of accountability, standards of curation, and documentation requirements.

Items that typically make up a federal archeological collection can vary significantly. They can include collected objects (e.g., evidence of human activities, comparative collections for raw materials used by humans, and other scientific samples); field documentation of the objects (e.g., field notes, maps, drawings, and photographs); and laboratory documentation (e.g., collection inventories, computer documentation and data, and conservation treat-

ment records). Managing these diverse components of a collection requires different skills and resources. With this in mind, we devoted considerable effort in constructing the symposium to involve a diverse group of individuals, primarily from the Plains states, who are dealing with different aspects of archeological collections. Presenters included federal managers, federal cultural resource and property staff, multiple federal agencies, professional archeologists, an American Indian, collection managers, and repository personnel. It was hoped such a varied group would identify the many issues associated with managing archeological collections in the Plains and allow for the exchange of ideas and approaches in their management. We included examples of cooperation between federal and non-federal partners for the care of collections in order to understand the issues that arise out of such agreements.

Most of the presentations emphasized the importance of getting our nation's archeological collections up to acceptable federal standards and improving the accessibility of collections to the public. All agreed this is an enormous challenge. A strong consensus existed on the importance, and sometimes difficulty, of identifying federal collections as federal collections. Not surprisingly, similar national discussions resulted at the two Partnership Opportunities for Federally Associated Collections conferences held in Berkeley (1996) and San Diego (1998). These national conferences examined the entire range of federally associated collections (i.e., art, archeology, archives, history, ethnography, biology, geology, and paleontology) and came to the same general conclusions regarding collections management as our regional meeting did.

More recently, at the 1999 annual meeting of the American Association of Museums (AAM), the AAM Registrars Committee and the AAM Curators Committee sponsored a symposium chaired by Jan Bernstein of the University of Denver Museum of Anthropology entitled "New Directions in Curation of Federally Owned Collections." Two speakers representing levels within the Department of the Interior (DOI) presented overlapping, but not always congruent, views of the importance of establishing federal ownership of collections. They also reported on progress in defining the ownership of particular collections and on activities by the Federal Agency Working Collections Group to improve the management of all federal collections, the majority of which are in non-federal repositories.

Interpretation and application of federal standards were examined by a number of the presenters at our symposium. Although 36 CFR Part 79, *Curation of Federally Owned and Administered Archaeological Collections*, was discussed in the session, we agreed that many federal laws and policies were unknown to, or were poorly understood by, the individuals to whom management responsibility was given. This is also true for archeologists who assembled the collections. Even as such care providers improve their awareness of the responsibilities for managing federal collections under 36 CFR 79, they are still frequently unaware of other federal requirements. As an example, the panel at the symposium in 1996 was surprised to learn that all federal collections are not consistently treated. Different departments and their agencies have very different policies and guidelines that may affect curation for each sub-collection.

For example, the Department of the Interior (DOI) identifies five categories (i.e., Native American ethnographic collections, artwork, historical and/or scientific document collections, historic collections, and natural history collections) in addition to archaeological collections that are tracked for curation purposes through its Departmental Manual. This policy requires that additional consideration, beyond 36 CFR 79, be given to all six categories. Interestingly, agencies within DOI also may have more specific policies or guidelines at the agency level. This means what works for DOI may not work for the Department of Defense. Simply put, meeting the requirements of one federal collection in a repository's care may not meet the requirements of another federal collection under its care.

The DOI example brings up another frequently asked question: How do you recognize a federal collection? Progress has been made over the last decade in answering this question, especially with the completion of NAGPRA summaries and inventories. However, it was universally agreed at this symposium that documentation of many archaeological collections is often incomplete and confusing, thus preventing the establishment of clear ownership. Some argued that gathering basic information about federal collections is difficult because few people (federal or non-federal) truly understand what makes a collection "federal." The property manager in the session shed some light on what legally makes up a federal collection, but it was collectively agreed that making such determinations in the field is not easy. As an example, the ownership and responsibility for collections developed under the River Basin Surveys (RBS) program has created some controversy and has received considerable attention recently. The question is who owns these collections? It is most likely that solicitors will ultimately be called upon to provide a "final" opinion on the legal ownership of many RBS collections.

Needless to say, knowing the ownership of a collection has an enormous impact on its treatment. Federal agencies generally do not invest resources in collections that cannot be documented as federal property. When identified, however, federal collections are now beginning to be provided the care required by law. In some cases, federal dollars are being used to bump care of federal collections to a priority status within a repository, with some non-federal collections being placed on hold until repositories can obtain additional funds for their care. The issue of resources is extremely important, as the cost of curating collections increases and locations for curation become more difficult to find.

Listed below are brief summaries of the individual papers to follow. In "Accountability in the Management of Federally Associated Archeological Collections," Bobbie Ferguson and I provide background on the issues and legislation surrounding accountability for federal collections. We researched uniformity of compliance with 36 CFR 79 by federal agencies. Our results show that federal agencies are not managing collections uniformly, causing significant accountability problems.

Terry Childs in "Contemplating the Future: Deaccessioning" examines the issues involved in deaccessioning federal archeological collections.

Such a practice affects both resource and storage concerns. She discusses why it is time to incorporate deaccessioning into collections management practices.

In "Archaeological Collections as a Scholarly Resource: The Anthropology Department of the National Museum of Natural History's Approach to Collections Management," Krakker et al. provide information on how one department within the Smithsonian Institution (SI) is making their collection more accessible. They discuss the history of the archeological collections at the SI and the progression of the curatorial methods used by the Department of Anthropology to preserve and provide access to these important scientific collections. They focus on shifts in inventory control and storage methodology, and the move toward innovative uses of electronic media.

Brad Coutant and Judy Brown, in "The University of Wyoming Archaeological Repository and Federal Agencies: A Multilateral Partnership," provide an example of a partnership between several federal agencies and the University of Wyoming Archaeological Repository (UWAR). They describe how a cooperative agreement provided UWAR the

ability to complete a NAGPRA inventory, make physical improvements to the facility, and initiate a comprehensive inventory of its collections. They address both advantages and disadvantages of this agreement, and they provide insight into the value of partnering for collections management.

Mark Miller, a discussant at the symposium, captures the central theme of the symposium in his synoptic paper entitled "Some Thoughts on Archaeological Collections Management." In his discussions, he describes his experiences, observations, and opinions on the topic of collections management. He then reviews a series of variables (e.g., research value, academic awareness, and future directions of collections management) important to the care of an archeological collection. When it comes to managing collections, he emphasizes the importance of working toward problem resolution cooperatively, especially since "everyone has a stake in the outcome of [the] negotiations, and the credibility of our profession in the eye of the public depends on cooperation."

Myra Giesen is the NAGPRA coordinator for the Bureau of Reclamation.